REACHING FOR DREAMS IN THE DARK

SINTU BAGUI

AYESHA (AYUSH GUPTA)

Reaching For Dreams In The Dark

Sintu Bagui
Ayesha (Ayush Gupta)

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Wree

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Editorial

When I started Daxayoni Prokashoni, I didn't have a clear politics of what I wanted to do. I knew that I am trying to self publish my work, and help others like me publish work that they care deeply about. I had no idea how much time, effort, and degrees of involvement I have to put in for this to become reality.

I have known Ayesha and Sintu for a while. I have participated in their events, documented their workshop, and also collaborated in providing minor services. I also published Theatre of the Trans People: A Comic Zine with Ayesha as well.

I ended up going with Sintu and Ayesha to Malda and Siliguri to document the conversations there. This was in November, 2024. I have been involved in the bookmaking since.

Sintu did the analysis, and recorded the story chapters in Bengali. We transcribed and then translated them in English. Then we sat together and edited. After the stories were done, we developed the data profiles chapter. We all drew up multiple variations of our ideas in three separate pages for the visualisation and discussed amongst us to decide which represents the data the best. We ran into debates about how to best represent gender or caste in a way, that respects the protagonist's right to self identify. The visualisation also pointed out some of our mistakes like how we have failed to include tribal trans voices.

Yet, I am very proud of this book. Through this book, Sintu, who doesn't have a mainstream educational track, is publishing research in her own words. That changes the lens of the book vastly from what is accessible in the public domain. The book also doesn't read like a regular academic research, and I believe that adds to the accessibility of the book.

We had a long discussion about channels of publishing, pricing, and distribution of profit as well. Since this is a non-fiction book in public interest, as per Daxayoni Prokashoni policy, the digital version of the book will remain free to access on archive dot org.

Daxayoni Prokashoni keeps 30% of the net profit. Sintu gets 40% of the Net Profit. And the fifteen participants whose stories are being told keeps the rest 30%. Keeping that in mind, we have decided to keep the price of the printed edition at Two Thousand Rupees. The price isn't for the book, because the book is available for free to read. You are buying support. Your money supports independent publishing effort and infrastructure. Your money supports stories from the margins. Your money goes directly to the economic empowerment of grassroots trans people.

I hope this book provides some context to the ongoing gender and labour rights movements, I hope the readers enjoy the stories, and I hope to read more similar work in the future.

In Queer Love,
Wree

December, 2024

Foreword 1

Soma Roy

It is an honour to write this foreword for Sintu Bagui, someone I have known since 2013 and whose journey continues to inspire me year after year. Over more than a decade, I have witnessed her evolution from a young community leader with anunshakeable will to a nationally — and internationally — recognised voice representing the lived realities, struggles, and resilience of her community.

My association with Sintu has been deeply meaningful, both personally and professionally. One of the most defining milestones of our journey together was the creation of a documentary film based on her life, capturing not only her own experiences but also the oppression, courage, and resistance of the transgender and gender-diverse community she represents. This film became far more than a narrative — it became a tool for dialogue, awareness, and transformation.

In 2018, we travelled across the United States, screening this film at seventeen prestigious universities, where Sintu spoke with candour, dignity, and extraordinary strength. In every hall, classroom, and auditorium, she brought forward voices that the world often overlooks. Her ability to articulate complex realities with simplicity and truth moved students, professors, researchers, and activists alike. Those conversations sparked research collaborations, academic inquiries, and a deeper understanding of gender justice among global audiences.

Upon our return to India, the film continued its powerful journey, premiering at nineteen universities across the country. Sintu's presence and dialogue sessions often became transformational moments for young scholars, research groups, and civil society members. Beyond academic spaces, her story opened doors to important discussions with judicial units, police officers, and other institutional stakeholders — inviting them to rethink prejudice, process, and the rights of marginalised communities.

In **2019**, she faced **organisational power hierarchy and internal discrimination**, a painful reminder that oppression can take shape even within spaces meant to challenge it. Instead of retreating, Sintu transformed this experience into a deeper commitment, choosing integrity over silence and continuing her work with renewed strength

and clarity. Her ability to withstand such challenges while staying rooted in community speaks volumes about her character and her unwavering sense of justice. Sintu's leadership extends beyond advocacy. She **co-founded the organisation "Kolkata Anandam for Equality and Justice"**, a collective built with the vision of dignity, safety, and equality for LGBTQKH (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Kothi, Hijra communities) communities.

Her participation in platforms like Café Mela, community gatherings, and various research engagements further reflects her commitment to bridging worlds — between lived experience and academia, between activism and policy, between grassroots realities and institutional systems. In every space she entered, Sintu brought authenticity, clarity, and a disarming honesty that compelled people to listen, reflect, and act.

What stands out about Sintu is not only the courage with which she faced adversity but the generosity with which she transforms her experiences into learning for others. She carries her community's stories with responsibility and grace, reminding all of us that change is born not only from struggle but from the willingness to speak up, to be seen, and to remain hopeful.

As I reflect on the twelve-plus years of knowing her, I am filled with admiration for her journey and gratitude for the opportunity to walk alongside her in various chapters of this work. Her leadership is quiet yet powerful, her resilience is steady, and her contributions have left an imprint on countless individuals and institutions across borders.

It is with pride and deep respect that I present this foreword for Sintu Bagui, whose life and work continue to illuminate paths toward justice, dignity, and inclusion.

Sincerely,
Dr Soma Roy

Advisor and Well-wisher
Kolkata Anandam for Equality and Justice

Foreword 2

Sayan Bhattacharya

It is with great pleasure that I agreed to contribute to this important volume authored by Sintu Bagui and Ayesha. I have known Sintu for a decade now and have witnessed her at different stages of life. From her days of underpaid employment at the sex workers collective to representing the voices of trans and queer people of West Bengal at elite American universities, from organising LGBT led parliaments to income-generating food pop-ups led by kotis and trans women, to finally co-founding Kolkata Anandam. What has shone through all her moments of financial precarity and exhausting activist labours is her determination for a better life for trans people, a life founded in collective political commitment to just trans futures based in dignity of labour, right to gender expression, and general well-being. So, I was not surprised at all when my friend, Sintu, informed me that she was leading a research study on transgender visions of empowerment, to be co-authored by activist and academic, Ayesha, who also has a lot of experience working with grassroots initiatives in transgender movement building.

This is a book written with care. You will find here life histories of gender nonconforming people across a range of castes, income and age brackets. Many of them refer to themselves as transgender, but there are also many others who do not. Self-expression is not simply a matter of choice, but it also depends on access to cultural capital. but irrespective of how they identify, they have a deep understanding of their gender embodiments and how it informs how they understand their well-being. They work as domestic workers, sex workers, salespersons, hijras, performing artists, labourers in small factories, and so on. This is to say that all of them find employment in the informal sector; that comes with no regulations and no worker protection rights. While this labour precarity is shared by all working populations in the informal sector, gender non-conforming people are rendered more vulnerable due to their gender identity; stories of which you will find in the book. So, a vision of trans empowerment includes access to work opportunities, safe working environments free from harassment, among others. Empowerment, however, is not just about the right to employment. It is also about access to gender affirmation resources as a basic right, it is about networks of support and friendship, respect and love from natal families and so on.

The narratives of the study lead to an analysis and policy recommendations. It is my hope that this study will circulate widely among government officials, policy makers, relevant stakeholders, and among the communities from which this knowledge has generated. I hope it generates a lot of critical conversations in these authoritarian times. The need for collectivisation is more urgent than ever.

My best wishes to Sintu, Ayesha, and everyone associated with this study.

Sayan Bhattacharya,
Assistant Professor,

Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies
University of Maryland, College Park.

Starlight On A Dark Night

THE STORY OF SINTU

I dropped out of school in 2003. During my adolescence, I was not interested in studying. I was living in a sex worker neighbourhood. Because of that, I was facing a lot of discrimination. At that time, we did not have options for counselling support from schools or NGOs.

I took up a job in a shop in 2003. We were a big family. My mother, father, brother, sister, and I. We were struggling to meet our needs. At that time, I used to earn four hundred to five hundred rupees per month at the shop. I also had to face a lot of discrimination from other workers. The owner was supportive, however.

After that, in 2005, I joined a plywood factory where I would be paid a bit more. After a twelve hour duty shift, I earned seventy rupees at the end of the day. There were only two to three other transfeminine folks at that factory. I was bullied at that factory in various ways by the workers who were the supervisor's flunkies. They used to molest me and squeeze my breasts when they got a chance. I was assigned a lot of work. By the rules, I was owed overtime for the extra work. But they did not give me the full amount due to me. They took a cut. The factory was also very far from my home. The auto fare was only ten rupees, but I wanted to save even that, and so I used to walk to work.

Then I joined work at a marble tile shop. I used to earn eighty rupees after an eight hour duty shift. I had to travel in overcrowded trains to Uttarpara, and then walked to the shop. The contractor used to send me to various sites for the work. The brother of the contractor used to discriminate against me and yell obscenities at me. The Rajmistri did not allow me to work. He assigned me to shift bags of sand for entire days. They did not give me food and did not allow me to rest.

So I left that job. But then abuse started at home. I was taunted because I was not contributing anything to the household expenses. Without an income, how could I? I used to weep a lot in those days. Then I returned to the shop where I first started. My salary was seven hundred rupees per month, and I would get ten rupees daily for tiffin expenses. That was hardly enough money for me to manage, but I worked there for two years.

Then I returned to the plywood factory. I used to earn eighty rupees after a twelve hour shift. They assigned me to night duty, from 6 pm to 5 am. My home was seven kilometres from the factory. Then, I rented a place in a middle class residential neighbourhood. I was forced to do various personal chores and errands for the head workers. They also tortured me physically. The store manager was sexually harassing me, pinching my breasts, or pressing his finger against my butt. At the factory, while working, often chemicals would fall on my hands, producing sores and blisters. I still have those scars.

In addition to the factory work, I took up the job of washing the floors at a brothel. After returning from the night shift at the factory, I went to the brothel to wash the floors. Then I would go to buy groceries and walk seven kilometres to my rental home. My grandmother and sister used to cook while I took some rest. My grandmother used to wake me up at 2:00 – 2:30 pm. Then I used to walk back to give food to my mother. And then back to the factory in the evening. In summer, often my dinner used to spoil due to being out in the heat. I left that work in 2009.

When I was young, I used to go to Durbar's (Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee) meetings. I used to participate in their protest rallies and celebration rallies. In 2009, Durbar offered to hire me as a peer educator for fifteen hundred rupees monthly salary. I worked there for six years. I learned movement building at Durbar. In 2012, I started doing Jagran performances. Then, in 2014, I joined as the Director of the Targeted Intervention program. The salary was six thousand rupees per month. From 2014-2016, I worked in this position covering Howrah, Hooghly, Bardhaman, and South 24 Paraganas districts. In 2015, I also joined as the Secretary of Balaram Dey Street Anandam, a sub-group within Durbar. But there I also had to face a lot of harassment. My mental health had started being impacted greatly. In 2016, I left Durbar.

I was worried about how I would pay for my daily expenses. I started selling fried chicken skin. That was a huge success. I learned how to set up a home kitchen and started one. I used to go shopping for groceries at 6 am. My grandmother and sister used to help me cook the skins.

During this time, in 2016–2018, I collaborated with the University of Pennsylvania to co-direct a documentary titled, 'Until and Unless', on the struggles of transgender folks in India under the 377 act that criminalised homosexuality. I also got the opportunity to visit the USA in 2018 to showcase this documentary.

In 2018, when the PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) program started at Durbar, I joined them again. But working in Durbar was still a challenge. There was no sustainability of my position there either. In 2019, I parted again from Durbar and formed 'Kolkata Anandam for Equality and Justice' (KAEJ), and joined as the Secretary of the organisation.

In 2020, the COVID-19 lockdowns started. I was in a lot of anxiety during that time. How will I survive? How will my communities survive, grassroots sex workers and transgender folks? My friend, Somabha, raised twenty-five thousand rupees via crowdfunding. Using that, I distributed rations to twenty-five ageing sex workers. Along with other community members, I also went to villages in various districts to distribute rations. I was also afflicted with COVID-19 myself two times. There were no quarantine safe houses for transgender folks. So, I stayed at my family's place in the brothel area. In two years, we helped almost five hundred people with rations. I also used some of the ration.

In 2021, my niece passed away. I was going through depression. I had accumulated some loans. I was struggling to pay bills. At that time, many people supported me and helped me get through.

In time, Kolkata Anandam grew in its activities and scope of work. I found a place from which I could voice my ideas. People started to recognise me. I also started some research. In the past couple of years, I got some fellowships and research consultancy opportunities. That helped me pay off some loans. I was able to buy a flat, though I had to take a loan for that. But as these fellowships of consultancies draw to a close, I am worried about whether I will continue to get these opportunities. How will I survive in the future? When will I have some stability in my life? I continue to try to keep my balance within these rough waves.

It has taken a lot of struggle to gain what empowerment I have gained. There is still some distance to go.

Aalaap

THE STORY OF THIS BOOK

This book is about the dreams and aspirations of grassroots transgender folks. It is an exploration into what empowerment looks like to grassroots transgender communities in West Bengal, India. The research for this book was led by the two of us, Sintu Bagui and Ayesha (Ayush Gupta). Sintu Bagui is a transgender activist with an interest in designing and conducting research. Ayesha is an academic with an interest in community-based participatory research. Sintu has been working for the empowerment of the grassroots transgender community for over two decades. Even during her work in the NGO sector, she has often collaborated with researchers, helping in the data collection process. Ayesha's research has been on how institutional cultures in universities marginalise students, but more recently has been exploring participatory research with the grassroots transgender community for educational goals.

In 2022, Ayesha had organised a one-day Theatre of the Oppressed workshop (in collaboration with Samabhabona, a grassroots transgender organisation) in Kolkata. That's where we met. When there was some free time in the afternoon, Sintu took the opportunity to talk to Ayesha and others about how researchers are not always responsible when working with the community. We resonated a lot over how grassroots activists and researchers can work together with a more balanced sharing of power and decision-making.

We became friends and would often talk about research. Sintu had expressed that she wanted to explore the whole process of designing a research project, from articulating research questions to conducting the analysis and making claims. We wondered how we could collaborate.

One day, during a routine conversation, we started discussing how transgender folks end up spending so much on cosmetics. We are contributing a lot to the profits of the cosmetic companies, but these companies do not provide us with any support or benefits. We estimated that many folks, even at the grassroots, can spend up to Rs. five thousand in makeup, cosmetics, and accessories per month.

These days, there are lots of options available to those who want to

change their bodies to look more like a man or a woman. Hormone therapy. Laser Hair Removal. Various surgeries are now available. But everything costs money. If we count all the people in our community availing these services, that would add up to a very large amount that our community is paying for gender-affirming transformations.

This raised many questions. Are people making these expenses freely, of their own choice? The costs associated with transforming one's body, isn't that also a kind of patriarchal tax on people who do not conform to the gender assigned to them at birth? This transformation is also an economic activity associated with the capitalist system. In most cases, gender non-conforming people don't benefit from the capitalist patriarchal system. But we have to align ourselves with the system in various ways, for survival. And we have to pay for that survival to companies, doctors, family, and partner(s).

What is the economic situation of our community in this system? During COVID-19 lockdowns, community members had to go through a very difficult time. Many lost their jobs or had to close down their shop or small business. How did members of our community struggle to regain their financial situation? What challenges did they face? Did they have to change professions? How many people are still struggling? We know some stories from people we know, but we needed to know many more stories.

Most of the older transgender folks do not have savings. What about the younger folks? Are they saving for the future? Do they have mentors who can tell them about saving for their future? Do they know what schemes to invest in? Are they getting the benefit of government welfare schemes? What challenges are they facing now when trying to gain financial stability?

Our community needs financial security and stability. If our basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter are secure, then we can strive harder for a life with dignity, advocate for our rights, protest discrimination, and get an education. When we are financially strong, our families will find it in themselves to be more supportive. The movement for our dignity and

rights requires our economic empowerment. Gaining financial status would not automatically get rid of other forms of discrimination we face on the basis of gender, caste, social status, or disability. Economic empowerment of the community, we feel, also requires addressing these social inequities. Otherwise, the only people who benefit would be those who already have some privilege.

We are not seeing economic empowerment at the grassroots level. Some people are gaining financial stability, but most are exploited in this capitalist system. After the COVID-19 lockdowns, many of our community members had to change professions, many went into debt, many haven't found stable jobs. Most of the members of our community are below the poverty line. This capitalist patriarchal system needs to be overhauled. Will we be able to come together for the struggle to resist and transform the system?

We wanted to investigate these questions. Grassroots voices are not well represented in the research literature on our community. When grassroots transgender folks are included that's mostly as interview participants. The analysis is done by the privileged researchers. We feel that for grassroots voices to truly be represented in research, it is important that the reins of research be in the hands of grassroots folks, that they be able to make the research decisions.

We started this work with these questions and orientations. We did not have funding when we started. So, we had designed a very small study with ten interview participants. About a month later, we heard of the Global LGBTQ+ seed grant from the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) Williams School of Law. We discussed our ideas with Raina Roy, a mutual friend and a prominent transgender activist in Kolkata. We have often discussed the issue of economic empowerment with Raina. Raina and Sintu submitted the proposal with Ayesha and Pooja Balasubramaniam, an economist, as advisors. Thankfully, our proposal was approved for funding and we could proceed with a more extensive research design. Raina, unfortunately, could not participate in the project activities because of her health.

We did thirty-nine interviews in total. Interview participants represented a range of gender identities, caste, disabilities, and socioeconomic class. Based on our analysis we constructed thirteen case studies. This project enabled us to hear the stories of many community members. This is something that we treasure. In this book, we are sharing some insights and stories that emerged from our research. We hope to continue this work since many more stories need telling. One of our goals in writing the book is to encourage more people from the grassroots to conduct their own research relevant to their lives and that university researchers come to stand with them in this enterprise.

In the next chapter, How we did the work, we discuss the research process, our data collection and analysis methods, and how we navigated challenges that emerged.

Then in At a Glance, we will present the collective profile of all the people we interviewed. Here we are presenting the profile in terms of social categories such as gender identity, caste, income level, disability, profession, age, and so on. Here we will discuss the patterns that we observed in this profile.

Stories from selected participants are presented in the chapters from Joyful Smile at Sorrow's End to Crossing Barrier.

In Conclusion, we end with broad insights from our study and implications for policy and research.

We will love to hear your feedback. You can send your feedback to sintucan@gmail.com

Sincerely,
Sintu and Ayesha

How We Did Our Work

In doing this research, our objective was to better understand economic empowerment for the grassroots transgender community. How are grassroots transgender folks trying to gain empowerment in their lives, and what challenges are they facing? How are they navigating those challenges? And how do grassroots transgender folks make meaning of empowerment?

To do this, we had to make many decisions without a clear answer. For example, how many people should we interview? Which districts to cover in our research? What kind of questions will we ask in the interviews? On which topics? And how many questions do we want to ask? How we answer these questions in the context of our research would shape the outcomes. For example, the design of interview questions impacts what answer the participant gives. If I ask someone, "How is your work going? Can you share in some detail?" they might answer in a story. But If I ask, "Do you feel free in your place of work?" and sit in front of the participant with an open form in which we are ticking, it is possible that the participant might only give short answers in "yes/no" without a lot of elaboration. This is because the participants also look to the interviewer for directions on how much to speak and if they are speaking on topic.

When we made the interview questionnaire, initially we had written a lot of questions. Almost 30 questions. And the questions were worded in such a way that it seemed that we were asking for numerical data, not stories of participants. We also discussed this with our colleagues, Puja Balasubramaniam and Tathagata Sengupta, and with the IRB review committee at C-SHaRP, Chennai. After considering various options, we decided that we would include 11 questions that would likely elicit shorter answers and numerical data, and the rest of the questions would be such that we can engage in hearing participants' stories and understand their perspectives in detail. The box below shows an example of a question:

Initially, we had also planned to interview a lot of people. We were feeling that our study sample should be representative of the diversity in the community. But if we had done that, then we would only have been able to get numerical data in interviews. We would not have gotten to know the stories of the people. These stories are needed, we felt, because

the intellectuals, the government, NGOs, activists, and philanthropists are all trying to define what empowerment means for the community. But in that, the perspectives of the grassroots are often lost. Those perspectives can be highlighted through the stories they tell. That is why we had thought that we would want to do interviews with 100 people, to tell their stories. But when we started the work, we saw that in order to do the analysis well, we would not be able to do so many interviews. Finally, we did 39 interviews, and in this book, we include 13 case studies.

The first 24 interviews were conducted by Sintu. These participants were from Hooghly and Kolkata districts. The interviews were audio-recorded. After these 24 interviews, we listened to the audio records of about 10 interviews together and discussed them. We noticed that many participants were giving rather short answers to the questions. We thought that might be because we are starting with the data-like questions. For the remaining interviews, we decided that right from the start, we would tell the participants that we are interested in hearing their stories. We will not start with the data-like questions, but also include them at the end. Some of the numerical points would also come out in the stories, we hoped. We also decided that both Ayesha and Sintu will conduct the interview together. Around this time, we also decided to include Malda and Jalpaiguri districts in West Bengal. That way, we can hear stories from different contexts. In Malda, we worked with Debi Acharya (Malda Parichoy) and in Siliguri, Darjiling District, we worked with Prabir Ghosh (Uttar Falguni Society, Siliguri).

The settings for the interviews in Malda and Siliguri were a bit different from earlier ones. The interviews in Hooghly and Kolkata were conducted in someone's house (Sintu's, the participants', or the home of a mutual contact person, Maitreyi) or at a local cafe. Only Sintu and the participant were present during those interviews. In contrast, the participants from Malda and Siliguri were invited to our hotel room for the interview. And in Siliguri, in a couple of cases, two people had come together for the interview. In Siliguri, Prabir was also with us during the interviews, and in Malda, Debi was with us during the interviews. And for both Siliguri and Malda, we were also accompanied by Wree (the editor for this book) to help with documentation. That's why in Malda and in Siliguri, we had

from 5–6 people in the room during the interviews.

We tried to include participants from diverse professions, gender identities, and socio-economic statuses in our research. But we were not able to implement this aim properly. We created a profile of all our participants to get a sense of the makeup of our participants. This is presented in the next chapter.

After the interviews were conducted, we started with the analysis. Sometimes we met online for this. When possible, we met at a cafe or at the home of either one of us to do this work. Our aim here was that Sintu should be able to participate in all aspects of the analysis process. We listened to each of the interview recordings together. As we listened, Ayesha generated some quick notes to keep track of the interview conversation. These notes helped in subsequent analysis. After listening to each interview, we discussed how the participant spoke about empowerment, how they were trying to empower themselves, what challenges they were facing and what support they were getting. We took notes on this, too. After this preliminary analysis was done for all the interviews, we selected the stories that spoke to the theme of empowerment powerfully. We also tried that collectively, the cases represent many different professions, locations, genders, economic statuses, and perspectives.

Typical social science research methods often demand resources (prior training, time, and appropriate compensation for the time) that we were short on. We wanted to tailor the analysis process to resources available to grassroots folks, so more grassroots folks can engage in such research.

For each interview that we marked as a case study, we reviewed the notes on the interview conversation and tried to recall the scene for that interview. Then Sintu would audio-record the case study, in her own style, and in a single shot. We tested this process for a couple of cases before deciding to go ahead with it. Wree transcribed the audio recordings of the case studies. Ayesha and Wree then translated the case studies into English. We went through the English versions, cross-checking with the interview conversation notes and making any edits as needed. Wree

took the final editing pass and also ensured that appropriate changes were included in the Bangla version. Sintu also reviewed the final Bangla versions. The English and Bangla versions are not literal translations, but we have tried to keep the meanings and emotions the same.

Then we needed to make the profile of the participants in the study. We made a table on a large chart paper, with columns such as age, gender, caste, annual income, etc. Each participant got a row, in which we filled out their details. From there, we generated some of the counts needed for the profile. Working on paper had the advantage that knowing spreadsheet software is not a barrier to participation. Wree helped us in interpreting the data and generating visualisations.

At A Glance

In this chapter, we present a demographic profile of our participants. Our purpose here is not to do quantitative analysis, or even comparative analysis. The purpose here is to provide a feel for the participants at a glance.

In order to generate this profile, we tried to understand participants' responses to inquiries about caste, gender, age, disability, annual income, district, profession, contact with birth family, and housing situation. Sometimes, this process was messy. We discuss some of these complexities below within the specific subsections.

Districts

Our study participants came from Hooghly, North 24 Parganas, Malda, Darjeeling, and Kolkata districts of West Bengal, India. In the map below we indicate the number of participants from each district.

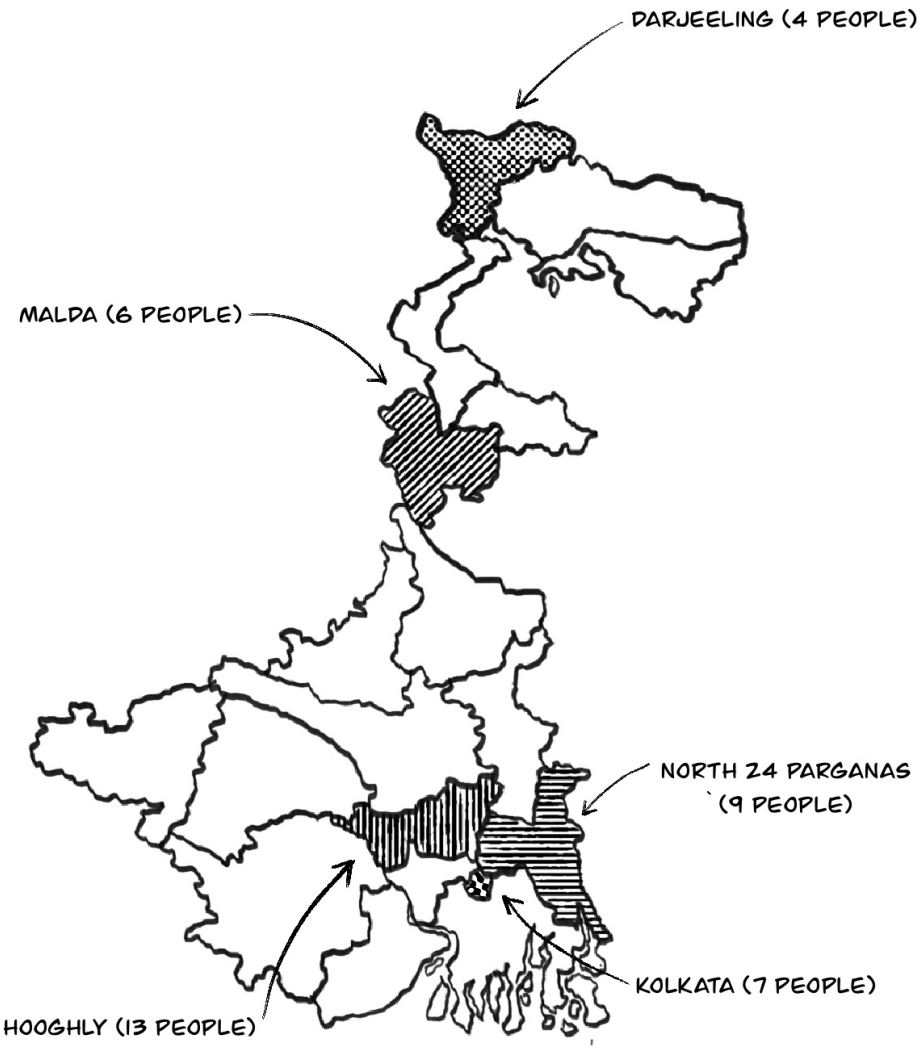

FIGURE - DISTRICT MAP

Age

To characterise the age profile of our participants, we wrote down all their ages and tried to find the age ranges for the participants.

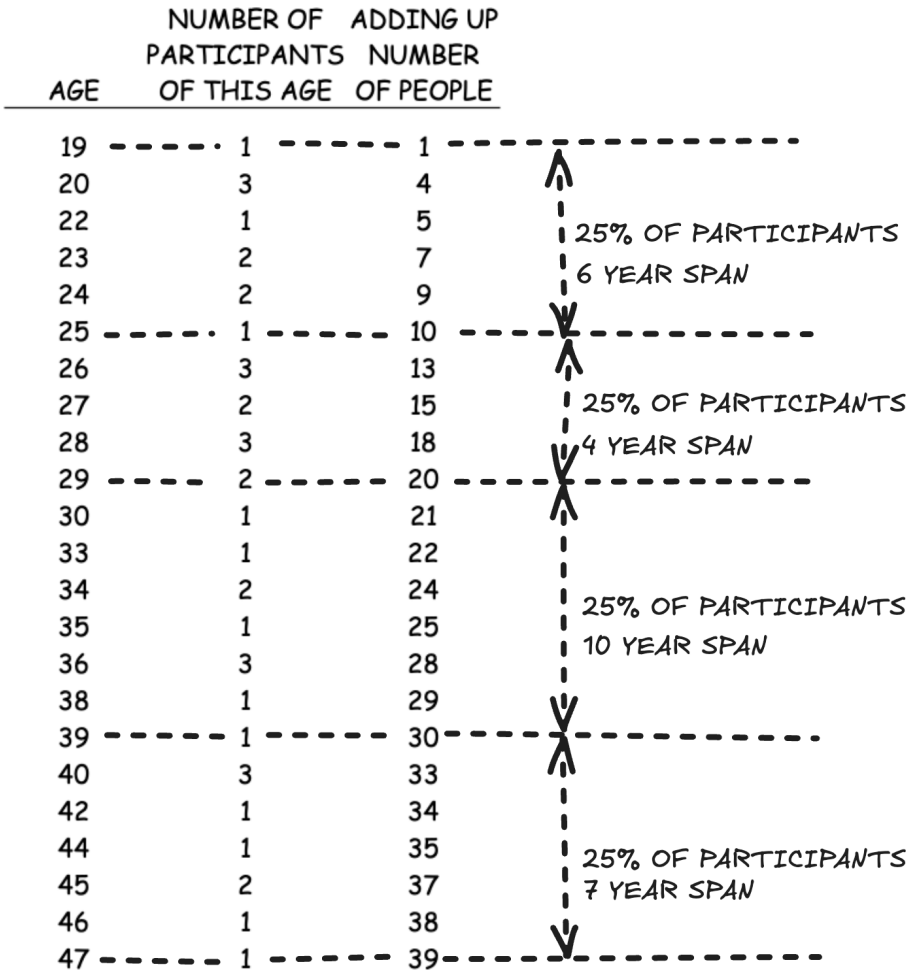

FIGURE - AGE DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH

Caste

A majority of participants struggled to self-report their caste location when initially asked. We often had to provide clarifications, alternative phrasing such as “jati” or “varna”, or list some caste categories, or ask if they have a SC/ST certifcate. Many initially also responded to this question with “Hindu.” In most cases, we were able to reach a mutual understanding of our question and their response after some discussion. In response to the question on caste, some people said they are Rajbangshi, Mahishya, Brahmin, Halder, Bihari Sharma, Bengali et cetera. One person said, “Biologically, I am from a brahmin family.”

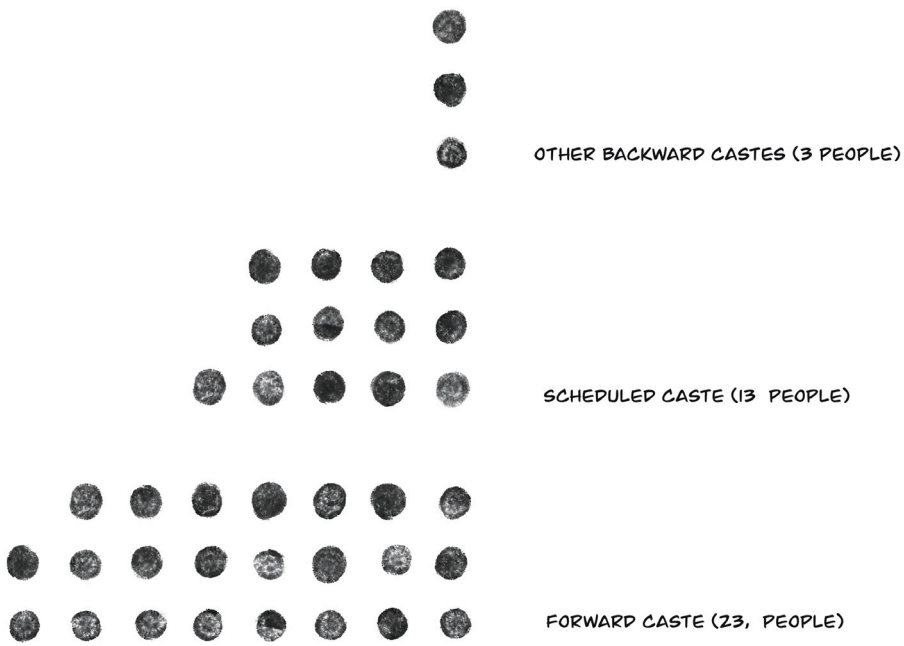

FIGURE - CASTE DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH

None of the participants talked about their struggles from a caste lens. The interview was also not set up to probe this question deeply. But we acknowledge how caste society structures itself to produce oppression. It is a casteist imagination that structures transgender people’s ability to

earn their livelihood in such constrained ways, where compliance with exploitation is a necessary condition for survival. We did not have Adivasi transgender folks in our study, and that is our failure too. That caste does not end up becoming a central lens through which we understand the experiences of grassroots working class transgender people is also a crucial error in our methodology.

Gender

Some participants struggled to articulate their gender identity when asked. Most tried to answer this question initially in an English word, which could have added to the struggle. We are reporting here the labels that they people settled on for their gender. The number in the column 'Counts' indicates the number of participants who aligned with that label.

LABELS USED	COUNTS
Transgender	14
Transwoman	05
Kothi	09
Gay	02
Meye	01
Transman	04
Manly Kothi	01
Kothi (Hijde)	01
Female, Transgender	01

FIGURE - LIST OF GENDER LABELS AS USED BY PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH

Disability

Among our participants, four shared that they had disabilities. Two participants were afflicted with epilepsy, one was born with only one kidney, and one participant only had one seeing eye. These participants all faced challenges in schooling and securing livelihood since they did not find suitable accommodations. Their stories are also shared in the book.

Housing

Twenty-nine out of thirty-nine or seventy-four percent of our participants reported staying with their birth family. However, their relationship with the birth family is varied. While some have found acceptance with some family members, others aspire to that. Yet others feel that their acceptance in the family is contingent on continued financial contribution.

Economic Status and Employment

All of our participants were working in the informal sector. Many took up seasonal work such as performing in religious functions. As such, their monthly income was not fixed. Based on the participants' reports about their monthly income and additional seasonal income, we estimated each person's annual income within one of three ranges; fifteen people earn below one lakh rupees; twenty-one people earn between one lakh to three lakh rupees; and three people earn above three lakh rupees. If participants had mentioned a range for their monthly income, we took the middle of the range value to estimate the annual income.

Most people reported working 6-8 hour days, with some working 12 hours per day. However, many of the informal professions that participants are engaged in are stigmatised (such as sex work, begging, or bar dancer). This stigmatisation opens workers up to harassment, exploitative wages, and unsafe work conditions. Some of these issues apply broadly to all folks working in informal professions, irrespective of gender. In addition, many participants reported facing gender based

violence at work (verbal, physical and sexual harassment and assault), resulting in many leaving those jobs and forced into more stigmatised professions. The struggle to gain mainstream jobs is not for a lack of trying or a lack of skills. Many participants have looked for jobs and even worked in some jobs. But had to quit because of exploitative work conditions, harassment, or violence. The next figure shows a word cloud of all the different professions that our participants reported having worked in or currently working in. The word-cloud shows how even within our small sample of 39 participants, transgender folks are contributing within a very wide range of professions.

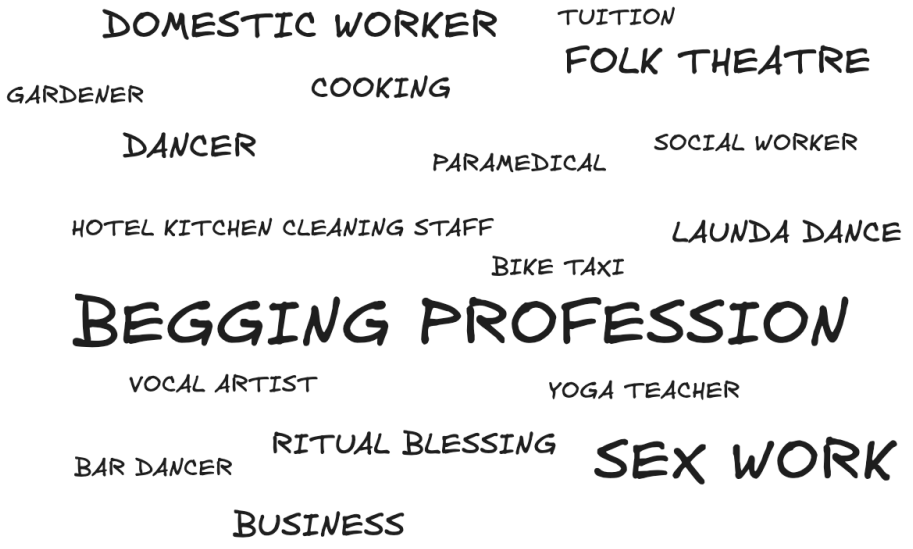

FIGURE - WORD CLOUD OF VARIOUS PROFESSIONS OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH

Income levels deeply impact all other aspects of life, such as health, education, mental well-being, housing, social security, and social status. For folks who are earning less than 1 lakh a year (a whopping 15 out of 39, or 38.5% of our participants), how can they be expected to bear medical expenses? They are barely able to meet their daily expenses. No participant had health insurance. The public health infrastructure is inadequate and rife with transphobia. There is almost no structural support for mental health care.

Many participants especially those in sex work, makeup work, folk theatre (Jatrapala), bar dancing, dancing at events shared that the makeup, clothing, costumes, and accessaries that are essential to their work also make up significant chunk of their expenses.

Most participants did not have savings, though some are trying or aim to when they would have more resources. For folks above 35, pathways to saving are also unclear, as they age out of erotic professions such as sexwork, bar dancing, etc.

Skills

FIGURE - WORD CLOUD OF VARIOUS SKILLS OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH

Our participants collectively represented a wide array of skills such as classical and folk dances, tutoring, yoga, business management, community organising, makeup artistry, cooking, house work, sculpting, and so on. We are not thinking of these skills necessarily in the narrative of skilling and livelihood, though it is linked to that. We are thinking of skills more broadly as participants' capacities that they have a right to develop and that are linked to dignity and empowerment. Figure X shows a word cloud of all the skills our participants had. However, they are being denied the opportunities to express their skills to their full

potential. The stories in the following chapters point to how each person had to face severe social and institutional barriers to empowerment. Their family and community has also not focussed on empowering people or developing their capacities. Some of this is also linked to how families and communities do not invest in the development of gender non-conforming children, having relegated them as the source of shame in any case. But some of this is also linked to how class status constrains people from accessing opportunities to develop themselves. Denying them their fundamental rights they are consigned to begging, sex work, erotic dancing, and ritualistic blessings as sources of livelihood. For our empowerment, it is important that grassroots transgender folks be recognized as poets, artists, dancers, designers, writers, builders, organisers, problem-solvers, and managers; not in some future, but immediately.

A Joyful Smile At Sorrow's End

This is a story about Ajay, a transman who lives in Kharda in the North 24 Parganas district. Ajay is thirty-four years old and has a forward caste background. Ajay has a partner who is thirty-three years old. They have an understanding where they fulfill mutual responsibilities towards one another. Ajay lives with his maternal grandmother. Ajay is dedicated to taking care of his grandmother. She is seventy-eight years old, and there is no one else to look after her. Ajay has worked very hard so he can take care of her.

Ajay was orphaned as a child and went to live with his maternal grandparents. It was a struggle for Ajay's grandfather to provide for Ajay's food, clothing, and education. So, when Ajay was in class III in school, he was sent to live with his aunt. His aunt was in better financial condition and could provide for Ajay's needs. Ajay was admitted to a school and also got assigned to a private tutor. However, every day, he also had to do all the household chores such as sweeping and mopping, washing dishes, doing laundry, and cooking. He could study only after finishing all the housework. If the housework was not satisfactory, his uncle beat him.

As Ajay grew into adolescence, his uncle started abusing him physically and sexually. He endured this for some time. But by the time he was in grade six, he could not take the abuse any longer. One day, when his grandfather visited him, Ajay requested to go with him. Ajay was willing to live on one meal a day, but wanted to get out of that place. His grandfather took him back.

Ajay's grandfather used to sell chow mein in the market on his bicycle. It was difficult for him to meet all the expenses on that meagre income. Somehow, through all these challenges, Ajay successfully completed grade nine. But the financial situation forced him to quit school and start working for a living. After his grandfather passed away, he has been taking care of his grandmother.

Ajay used to work at a garment factory before the COVID-19 lockdowns. He loved the work of selling garments. He found freedom in this work. As a garment salesperson, he was not stuck in an office or factory all day;

he loved being able to go to different localities and areas for work and be in the open. Ajay was earning fifteen thousand to twenty-five thousand rupees per month, which was enough to meet his expenses. He could take care of his grandmother. He was also able to save up for his gender affirming surgery, which cost him two and a half lakh rupees. This was right before the COVID-19 pandemic started.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted Ajay's life. He lost his job. Though he had a roof over his head, it became a challenge to meet even the basic household expenses. Ajay spent his days during the pandemic struggling to get enough money to buy food for his grandmother and himself. This caused him a lot of stress. When he didn't have money, they had to eat by the handful, measuring and rationing even the sattu (roasted gram flour) that they consumed for meals. Many times, he had to skip a meal when they did not have enough for two people.

Ajay has found a job at another garment store, but it is not paying as well as the previous job. His monthly household expenses are around fifteen thousand rupees. Besides the household expenses, Ajay needs to spend three thousand rupees every month for his medicines, two thousand for an injection, and another one thousand for hormone pills.

Ajay wishes to get some more gender affirming surgery done. This would cost almost five lakh rupees. He had previously spent two and a half lakhs on surgery. But he is not able to save as much these days. He worries, how will he save up that amount and get his surgery done?

Freedom and empowerment, Ajay says, are linked not just to his gender identity. He wants his name to be acknowledged with respect. He does not regret that he could not finish schooling. He feels that he should be known for the quality and integrity of his work. But because he is a transman, he often has to face rejection from employment opportunities.

Ajay also links empowerment to being able to help others. Since he was orphaned as a child, he feels strongly about the suffering of distressed children. He wants to stand with marginalised and suffering children and with his community of transman brothers. This is what drives him and

takes him forward in his life and activism.

He has fought through many adversities. He has had to fight to maintain his self-respect. His fight is for survival with the dignity of his grandmother, partner, and himself. He dreams of opening a small business of his own. He wishes for the health and welfare of his community, so we can all live and work safely and satisfactorily.

Rose That Has No Colours

Mala lives in Baranagar, North 24 Parganas district. Mala identifies as a transgender woman and comes from a Hindu forward caste background. Mala has attended school till class V. Mala lives with her mother, her father, and her sisters. They support her and love her very much. She has a nephew who is also very supportive. She wants to bequeath all that she has to her nephew.

Mala works as a cook in people's homes. She has to work from 5:30 am in the morning till 2:30 pm in the afternoon. Mala loves cooking. She feels a sense of freedom in this work and enjoys it very much. She loves to see people eating the food that she has cooked. She feels very good when people give her compliments for her cooking.

Mala earns about five thousand rupees per month. Mala's father also gets a pension. So, they are not too stressed financially. Her father is able to meet the household expenses. But she likes to contribute by paying the grocery bill or the electricity bill. She likes being able to do something for her family. She feels proud that she can contribute financially to her family.

Mala had to face a lot of problems during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns. Her employers were also panicking. They kept their distance from her. Even now, if she had a little cough, everyone fears that they would get infected with COVID-19. It is distressing to her that even though COVID-19 has subsided, she has to always exercise extra caution when at work.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, one day at work, she accidentally burnt her hand by spilling the hot, starchy water from boiling rice. Her employers did not help her. She had to spend eight thousand to ten thousand rupees on her treatment. She says that doing this job is also like fighting a battle at times. In spite of all this, she likes the cooking job.

She owns a flat. She mortgaged the flat when her nephew needed money. The nephew pays for the mortgage payments. Currently, Mala is supporting her nephew so he can stand on his own feet. She has made nephew the nominee on her bank account. She hopes that her nephew

will take care of her in her old age, but is also uncertain about the future. She currently has about six thousand rupees in her account. She has not been able to save much. She does not spend much on herself. Just on some clothes or other essentials.

Mala feels that it is her right to be able to freely and without shame wear a saree, even in her own home and neighbourhood. She wants to be able to wear a saree freely without the worry of it bringing shame to the family. Mala wants to stand with the people who are struggling like her. That is empowerment to her.

Lost Traveller

Sunita is a forty-five year old transgender woman who belongs to a forward caste. Sunita's family home is in Serampur in the Hooghly district of West Bengal. But currently, she lives in the Dum Dum area in north Kolkata. Sunita's family supports her. Her father, mother, brothers, and sisters-in-law are all very supportive. She wants to live with her family in the future.

Sunita studied till class XI in high school. By profession, Sunita begs in the train compartments. Sunita earns about ten thousand to twelve thousand rupees in this profession. She contributes about six thousand rupees per month to her family. Her own monthly expenses, living in DumDum, are about five thousand rupees per month. So, she does not have much left for savings. She has a gold loan for which she has to make monthly payments.

Sunita told us that she used to feel a sense of freedom in her profession, but that is no longer the situation. She says that there are various restrictions from the government. She can only work fifteen days a month. Sunita said that transgender women like her are harassed due to the negative stereotypes associated with being transgender. They are rejected and humiliated. They are not given jobs. And even when they are trying to make a living via begging, they are obstructed. Sunita wishes that the government would not harass them in any way.

Before the COVID-19 lockdowns, Sunita had started working at an office. There, she was not paid a salary, even though the other workers were. Sunita said this was because she was transgender. So, she had to join the begging profession to feed herself and her family and survive. Sunita says that it was through her experience during the COVID-19 years that she understood the oppression that transgender people face. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, when the trains got cancelled, she was unable to meet her daily needs. She managed to keep going in various ways. She went through many crises. Sunita had to take many forms of aid from groups and NGOs. She had to look for financial support from various sources. Then she started begging again once the trains started.

Sunita says that sex reassignment surgery (SRS) would bring her

mental peace. She knows that SRS will cost her at least two and a half lakh to three lakh rupees, which she cannot afford. She does not have any savings. Sunita feels that gender affirming surgery would empower her. She says that her status would increase if she could get SRS done. People will respect her a lot more if she has her surgery done. At present, Sunita constantly fears that because she has not undergone surgery, people can call her a fake transgender, beat her up, or torture her in other ways. Many times, she is afraid that even the police might interrogate her about why she has not undergone surgery. She also feels pressure from relatives and friends to get her surgery done.

Sunita does not aspire to become a leader or malik in the profession. She feels that would alter her lifestyle a lot, which she does not want. Sunita wants to live her life as an ordinary person and continue her profession. Sunita wishes that in the coming days she would be able to practice her profession safely, freely, and with dignity. She feels that there are almost no opportunities or support for employment or retraining, especially for middle aged transgender persons like her. She asks, *"How are we supposed to survive?"*

Sunita wants to work for the recognition of begging as a legitimate profession. Then, she feels, the police would not be able to harass them anytime they want. Sunita feels that this is her fundamental right. She asks, *"If the Constitution of India does not outlaw begging, then why are we harassed?"*

The Bride Without A Palanquin

This is the story of Prashant, who is forty-two years old and identifies as Kothi. She comes from a general caste background. She lives in the Bonhooghly area. She lives with her mother and brother. Her brother has three daughters. Prashant went to school till grade VI.

Prashant works as a domestic worker for household chores. She earns about one thousand rupees per month and gets a daily meal at the home where she works. Her work hours are 2 pm to 6 pm daily. She suffers from epilepsy and so cannot do heavy work. She cannot get up early in the morning. If she gets up early in the morning by 6 am, she gets an attack by 8 am. That is why her family also does not pressure her much. Sometimes Prashant also does sex work to meet her expenses. She goes to various locations for sex work, including by the highway. But if she meets a handsome man, she has sex with him for free.

Prashant contributes about five hundred rupees monthly towards household expenses. She says that her brother does not want to take the money, but she still gives it, because she is living and eating at home. The rest of her income goes towards her clothes and accessories.

Prashant told us that the money she earns does not suffice. Four to five years ago, she used to work at two houses. She used to get a salary of two thousand rupees at one place and five hundred rupees at another place. But she could not leave the house during the COVID-19 lockdowns. After the COVID-19 lockdowns, she struggled to get work until she found this one. But it does not pay enough.

Prashant loves to get dressed as a woman; she wishes for a nice partner. Prashant wants to get sex reassignment surgery (SRS) done. She said that SRS is very expensive, estimating it might cost between fifty thousand to almost one lakh rupees. She does not have any savings.

The future is a worrying topic for Prashant. She says, "*We live in a rental home right now. My brother is also getting older. His daughters would look after him. But who will look after me? I don't have money. No one is beside me. Sometimes, I feel that if God would call me back, that would be better.*"

Prashant gets help from other transgender persons and activists she knows. She sometimes gets ration through them. That helps her get by. She said that her phone does not have a cover right now, nor is it recharged, since she has not gotten her salary yet.

Prashant dreams that if she had money, she would have changed herself through sex reassignment surgery, she would have kept a partner, and also given money to her partner to stay with her. She would have worn shankha and sindoor. She would have always dressed up well like girls. She would have been very happy.

We asked Prashant if people supported her, and she said that even as a child, she would wear her sisters' clothes. Her mother, father, and brother used to scold her then. She loved makeup and beautification. Her girl friends supported her a lot. Had God given her birth as a woman, then by now, she feels she would have been married.

When we asked what her empowerment is, what she understands by empowerment or what empowerment means to her, she replied that she does not understand what empowerment means. She feels that the government is doing good work for others, giving them money, but not to people like us.

Rendezvous Of The Black Roses

Punita and Mukul are very good friends, and they came together for the interview. Mukul and Punita stay in Siliguri. One of them identified as Rajbanshi. The other belongs to the forward caste. They were studying in school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Punita was also working as a freelance makeup artist. At that time, she also did not need to contribute money at home. If she earned two hundred rupees one day, that was enough for her. But after the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to look after their families. They had to figure out how to survive once the COVID-19 lockdowns were lifted. And that's when they decided to join sex work as a profession.

Before COVID-19, when the NGOs were running various HIV intervention projects, they used to work there. And there they got to talk to many community members, especially senior transgender folks. Many folks from the Hijra gharana also came to the NGOs. They also supported them and coached them. At that time, NGOs had played a vital role in counselling individuals and families. There was a system for HIV interventions too. The family counseling helped their father and mother to accept them. However, the NGOs are currently closed.

Punita and Mukul told us that they have to face various challenges and adversities in doing sex work. Police and clients harass them in various ways. Clients can force them to perform sexual acts they are not comfortable with. Many times, clients pressure them to have sex without using condoms. Because they have to routinely face these dangerous situations, the transgender women among the local sex worker community have taken a decision to meet clients in groups of two to three. They are better protected that way. They tell the customer up front that they will divide the money equally among them.

They are afraid that there are no safe spaces like before. All the safe spaces for sex work are in uncomfortable environments. That's why, at night, if they can't find a hotel, they try to motivate the customer to finish quickly. That way they can collect the payment and do not need to stay for the whole night. For now, that is how they are working.

They pick up customers from various bars. The bars have a strict policy

that they have to get the clients to spend a lot of money at the bar. They can take the client to a different location only after the customers have spent money at the bar. They take four thousand to five thousand rupees from the client for sex.

If the customer has already booked a hotel room, they charge five thousand for services. If the customer does not have a hotel, they take him to a hotel that they know. For the room rent of the hotel, they take an extra two thousand rupees from the customer. They tell the customer up front that they are shemale or trans and if the customer agrees, only then do they go with them.

One thing they both told us repeatedly, that they have to keep themselves pretty and stylish, they have to present themselves prominently, that's when they get more customers. They said that there are some transgender sex workers who go to the bar and drink a lot, clap, and create a scene. Because of this, because of those two to four people, the whole community is being banned from some of the bars. That is why they follow these rules strictly. They maintain the norms and security protocols of the bar when taking customers.

Punita and Mukul told us that customers do not keep cash these days. Most of the customers prefer to make an online payment. So they try to take the payment in advance. Because after finishing, many customers do not want to pay up. Besides, in this profession, there can arise many different kinds of trouble. That's why taking the money in advance is a lot safer for them.

Punita and Mukul are very cautious about HIV infection. They get tested regularly for HIV. Currently, HIV and Hepatitis cases are increasing. If one of them gets infected, who will look after them? That is why they are also spreading awareness about HIV/AIDS and the importance of getting tested among those who are new to the sex work profession.

They tell us that the income they are making currently is not sufficient. Every month, they give about thirteen to fourteen thousand rupees to their respective families. They are not enjoying sex work. They face a

lot of risks from customers who are younger men. But a senior citizen or a family man, those customers support them and pay them well. They often aren't interested in the physical act of sex itself and often seek emotional support. They are gentler lovers. They also shared that many customers who are not able to openly express that they are bisexual or gay or shemale-lover, but they are able to open up to them.

Punita and Mukul are very good makeup artists. Generally, they get appointments for make-up work through their friends, family and relatives and through Facebook. To maintain the quality of their makeup work, they have to purchase expensive products. Even a good lipstick can cost between eight hundred to seventeen hundred rupees.

Punita is married. She lives with her husband. Punita told us that she may continue in this profession for another two to three years, now that she is married. Even if the husband gets to know, she is more cautious that her mother-in-law and father-in-law don't know. She has told her mother-in-law that she works as a nurse or aaya. Her mother-in-law knows that she is a trans woman. Her husband had convinced his mother.

Mukul wants to open a shop. If her father could support her in buying the shop, then she could open up a beautiful shop selling lipstick, shampoo, and cosmetics. She wants to continue with sex work at night and run the shop during the day. Punita wants to open a makeup studio where she would also offer training for makeup artists. Currently, that is what she shared that she wants to open a makeup studio.

When we asked them what they understand by empowerment, they shared that by empowerment, they mean that they would alone be equal to a hundred, and we have to fight our battles ourselves. We need to get everyone on our side. That is their empowerment. Punita's and Mukul's story highlights to us how sex workers, while not regarded as professionals, are nonetheless reflective practitioners of their profession. They are creating structures and practices to keep themselves and their customers safe. They are looking out for each other. And in doing so, they shine out to us as leaders and activists in the gender justice movement.

Seven Colours Of Life

Rachana and Madhu are friends who came for the interview together. Both live in Siliguri. Both are street-based sex workers. Both of them belong to the Scheduled Caste.

Rachna wants to do some job. She has applied for many jobs before. She applied for government jobs, for work in tea gardens, and for work in various hospitals, but there was no response from anywhere.

Rachana used to work in an HIV Targeted Intervention (TI) project before the COVID-19 lockdowns. As part of this work, she used to accompany people for HIV testing, do field visits, data collection and fill out the peer diary or field diary. They used to get the salary only every six months. She didn't get the travel allowance for the trips she had to make. Due to this, she was facing financial problems. She was not able to make the monthly payments for her scooty. She had bought the scooty because her college was thirty kilometres away. It was not possible to travel without a scooty. Due to this, she was forced to quit her job at the project. After that, she started doing sex work to support herself.

Rachana had also worked as a receptionist. She had to go very early in the morning, wearing a sari, bangles, and lipstick. It was grueling work. She had a twelve-hour shift, in which she had to remain standing. She was only being paid six hundred rupees per day for her labour. So she didn't want to do this job anymore. Then, another option came to her, to work as a peer counsellor at an NGO. Rachana gave an interview, and was selected, but could not take up this job. The salary was good, but, here too, the salary wold have been paid every six months.

Madhu lives at home with her mother. Madhu used to work in a small bookstore. There, she was subjected to various forms of harassment. The workers in the shop sexually abused her in various ways and even beat her. Then she quit her job at the shop and left.

After the COVID-19 lockdown started, Rachna could not study anymore. She wanted to do her Masters, but because of the struggles with earning money to support herself, she could not continue her studies. Madhu studied till class X.

Rachna initially started street-based sex work alone, but then she took Madhu along. Madhu and Rachna are very good friends. They both work together. When Rachana and Madhu started working during the lockdown, they used to ask for two hundred to three hundred rupees per customer. When they saw that customers were coming to them, they gradually increased the rate to six hundred rupees. At that time, they used to work in a group of seven to eight members. Gradually, however, various challenges emerged.

At times, clients' belongings were stolen by some sex workers. As customers felt harassed by such activities, many stopped coming out of fear. Rachana shared that she had a very regular customer who used to pay her five hundred rupees. A few people from her group, however, had snatched thirty thousand rupees from him. After that he stopped coming too.

They also had to face violence in many instances. When Rachana had lost her phone, she had gone with her boyfriend to register an FIR at the police station. The police refused to register her case, and instead, verbally abused her and asked her to leave.

Rachana mentioned that they are not taken seriously and their complaint isn't registered if they go to the police station as a woman. But, if she goes as a Hijra, clapping loudly and yelling, only then the police register our complaint. She has had to face many such situations where the police did not take her case or beat her up instead.

Madhu shared that she struggled a lot when she started working as a sex worker. She felt very scared if some customer approached her when standing on the street. Now, she has overcome her fear. And so, now she can ask for a fair fees from the customer. Once she had gone to meet a customer, when a bunch of other men also entered the room. They snatched her phone. Rachana had to take her to the hospital after that incident. Since she was wearing clothes that marked her as a sex worker, the doctors did not want to touch her and did not allow others to touch her.

In another instance, a customer took Rachana far away to a dark and deserted place and then left her there after the service. She could not find a way to get back home from that place. She stood on the street for a long time looking to see if she could get a lift. She approached many people to request a lift. One person, on the pretext of dropping her home, took her instead to a large empty field. He took her to a tree in the middle of the field, and then called another friend of his there. The friend had a knife. Then they raped her. They claimed that they had paid her five hundred rupees but Rachana hadn't gotten any money. Rachana reminds us that there are also good people. That night, finally, another man actually dropped her home.

When they started sex work during the COVID-19 lockdown, it was challenging for Rachana to leave home in the evening wearing women's clothes. Her father asked her to leave the home. But her mother kept her there. She was put under a strict curfew; she must return home by 7 pm. But when her parents saw that she is earning money that she is contributing towards the home, they gradually removed these restrictions.

Rachana has a boyfriend right now. They were trying to legally get married at the court. The lawyer had asked for ten thousand rupees to arrange for that. Later the lawyer told them that no such marriage cases are currently being registered, and so, a court marriage cannot be arranged for them. Rachana has done sex reassignment surgery that cost her almost one and a half lakh rupees including hotel and travel expenses. Her family had prepared for these expenses. Rachana's family had told her that she should not join the Hijra profession, and in return they would have her sex reassignment surgery done.

Rachana and her boyfriend both live at her home. They pay five thousand rupees per person or a total of ten thousand rupees per month. Taking electricity and gas into account, they give about fifteen thousand rupees per month to her family. Since Madhu lives just with her mother, Madhu has to bear the entire household expense. She estimated that to be around ten thousand rupees per month.

Rachana wants to open a small shop. She cooks excellent momos and Thai food. There is a hospital in the compound where his house is, and there are also many shops there. But other shopkeepers have not allowed Rachana to open a shop there because she is transgender. She had to face a lot of discrimination. Rachana had started providing makeup services. She had invested four lakh rupees to buy cosmetics. But, she could not utilize that properly. Madhu wants to do a small business or a good job. If possible, she would also like to continue sex work alongside that. Even after facing various kinds of violence, even while living with various forms of social rejection, they are advancing their lives and activism.

In Rachana's and Madhu's story, we see their continued struggle to achieve their aspirations for a life of dignity and social respect. Along the way, they have tried to get various jobs, start a small business, and provide sex-work services. They are aware of their rights. They are supporting one another, and in doing so, creating informal structures for the safety of sex-workers, in a system that continuously tries to reduce the worthiness of their lives. The violence that sex workers face at the hands of customers, police, employers, and family are all too real. The violence on sex workers is connected to the other violences that women and gender non-conforming people have to face in our society, in homes, at workplaces, and outside. Their stories also point to structural issues that make life difficult for transgender folks and sex workers: from the salary structure in government projects to a lack of enforceable workplace protections for informal workers, and lack of physical, financial, legal, and medical safety for sex workers.

Chador Of Affection

Bobita Das is the protagonist of this story. Bobita lives in Malda town with her family and her chela-natichela.

Bobita was denied her share of the family property by her brother. She has lived and struggled in her own way, and over the years, she has carved out her own place in society. Today, Bobita works in lead roles in Monosha Pala, a folk theatre form in Bengal. She earns eight to nine hundred rupees per performance. The program is typically held in evening hours and lasts till midnight.

Bobita left her home in Bengal when she was fifteen or sixteen years of age and spent the next twenty-six years in Bihar as a dancer. After coming back from Bihar, she joined a Hijra guru, who introduced her to the begging profession. She worked on long-distance trains that go between Old Malda and Farakka junctions. Bobita faces lots of problems in her line of work. She was verbally harassed many times; passengers would ask for her phone number. However, she has been trying to engage in the begging profession with grace and politeness. She repeatedly tells us that she does this profession with love and joy. She needs this work to pay her bills. She is also proud that she has been able to help many chelas earn a living through the begging profession.

She now lives with a few of her chelas and nati-chelas. Almost twenty-five years ago, she had met a ten or eleven-year-old boy who was begging for food at the railway station. The boy followed her back home, and she raised him as her own. Bobita recounted proudly how she arranged her son's marriage. She noted that this was because of how she has made a place of dignity and respect for herself. Bobita's son now works outside West Bengal. Bobita enjoys spending time with her grandchildren.

Bobita received support from people from different levels of society at various times in her journey. The time of COVID-19 lockdowns had been challenging for Bobita. Bobita was living with about ten or twelve of her chelas and nati-chelas. At that time, trains, as well as the Monosha pala, were all discontinued. There was no source of income for them. Bobita, her family, and her chelas and nati-chelas relied on the rations provided by various NGOs during the COVID-19 period.

Bobita is very aware of the need for transgender women to achieve financial stability. Bobita has repeatedly tried to explain to her chelas and nati-chelas how to be financially stable, how to create their own financial space, and how to save money. Babita explains that having savings helps in gaining self-respect and will also come in handy in their old age. Bobita shared that one of her problems is that many of her chelas and nati-chelas don't listen to her in this regard. They don't save at all. They waste their money on various frivolous expenses. They spend all their money on their family.

Bobita has some land and some savings, but it is not enough to sustain her for the rest of her life. Bobita wants to open a shop to support herself in her old age.

Bobita has been harassed by the police at various times. She recounts an instance when she had confronted a policeman. The policeman was harassing her while she was begging on the train. The policeman took her to the police station. He argued that she was creating a public nuisance. She was successfully able to defend her case. Such instances have also brought her respect within the police. She shared how, at times, the police approach her to mediate in cases where trans women are involved. She also shared, however, that the police routinely file various cases against Hijra/Kothis engaged in the begging profession. Bobita noted that if Hijra/Kothis like her want to continue working, they are forced to go along with the police process, even though they do not know what cases are filed against them.

Bobita struck out to us the moment she walked into the room. She held herself with grace and dignity and a quiet power. In her story, we see how she was able to carve out a place of dignity, of power, and of stability, struggling against the adverse circumstances facing her at various moments. When asked what change she wants to see in society, Bobita says: *"I want trans women to stand up in life and do something in life. Why should transwomen be constrained to the begging profession? The government should provide trans women with employment!"*

Queen of the Dreams

Raj is twenty-two years old. She lives in Malda with her parents and two sisters. When asked about caste, Raj replied that she belongs to the Haldar jati. Asked about gender, Raj noted that in public, people would call her 'gay.'

Raj considered herself a girl from her childhood. She liked to dress up as a girl and used to keep her hair long. The neighbours used to mock her for that. Her parents beat her. Her mom used to force her to cut off her hair. They don't do these any more. Raj has also learned to live with the harassment. When lockdown started, Raj could not continue her studies anymore. The choice in front of them was between being able to pay for education, or put food on the table. Raj's mother also works as a domestic worker, But her father has eye problems that does not allow him to take up a job.

Raj used to make reels on social media and through that she got introduced to a Monosa gaan troupe. Now she earns through Monosha gaan performances. She earns about three hundred to four hundred rupees per day through this work. But she also has to pay for her earnings to get the dresses and jewellery for the performance. Most of her earnings are spent on that.

Raj does house-calls for make up work. Raj is also a traditional soil sculptor. She makes effigies of gods and goddesses. She makes some of these for herself and some she gifts to friends or family. Raj also works as a domestic worker in two houses. She is very happy about that.

Raj never wants to leave her family and live elsewhere. She wants her home to become a background and introduction to her rebellion. Raj has a friend whose father used to beat her for being trans. That friend ran away from home to Bihar. Police got her back from there. The friend's father had given a lot of allegations against Raj to the police, claiming that Raj had helped the friend run away. Raj's friends then went to the police and reported how much the friend's father used to abuse her. Police then let Raj go. Raj has an indomitable stubbornness. She does not want to run away like her friend. She wants to stay with her family and build up her own place while earning on her own. That, to Raj, would be

empowerment.

Raj wants to get breast enhancement and sex reassignment surgery done. She mentioned several times that she wants to have the surgery and become pretty. She believes the surgery will empower her. She wants to give herself a complete new makeover after her surgery so that the neighbours who were passing comments would think twice before engaging with her or be scared of talking to her. To fulfil these dreams, Raj wants to go to Mumbai and be a bar dancer like her friend. That would enable her to earn enough to follow her dreams. But then she wants to return home and hopes to live with her family with dignity and respect.

Wall of Sorrows

Chandana is a transgender woman who lives in a rural village in Malda. She has three brothers and three sisters. Chandana is the youngest of them all. Chandana suffers from epilepsy. She only studied up to class four because of epilepsy. Her parents didn't want her to go to school anymore in case an epilepsy attack happens there. Chandana loved dressing up in saree and bangles from early childhood. Because of this, she got beaten up by her brothers a lot during her childhood.

Chandana used to go watch Monosha Pala, a local folk theatre performance. She wanted to do folk-theatre herself too. So she contacted the programme manager and started her folk theatre journey when she was twenty years old. She estimated that she earns four hundred to five hundred rupees a day from her folk theatre performances.

Chandana also has a Hijra guru, who initiated her in the begging profession. Along with begging and performing in Monosha Pala, Chandana started performing launda dance with orchestras as well. For a little bit, she had gone to Bihar to work in orchestras. She got her sex reassignment surgery (SRS) in Bihar because she was told that she would transition into a pretty woman with the surgery. After the SRS she was not sure what to do for work, and she eventually went to Delhi to join another Hijra guru. Chandana had to face various tortures at the hand of her guru in Delhi. She was made to work a lot, and was beaten up often. Once Chandana's guru even threw chilli paste in Chandana's eyes. Chandana then ran away from Delhi back to Malda. The guru in Malda is a lot more supportive of Chandana. Currently, Chandana performs in Manosha Pala and is also engaged in the begging profession.

Chandana lives with her mother and her divorcee sister. Chandana is the main provider for the family. Chandana's monthly household expenses are about thirty thousand to forty thousand rupees per month. She had also provided financial support to one of her elder brothers when he was out of a job. She is hardly able to save after paying for all the household expenses. Sometimes, she even needs to take a loan from a local money lender at very high interest rates: ten rupees in interest per month on a loan of one hundred rupees. Chandana is worried that she is in a lot of debt because of this.

COVID-19 lockdowns were a particularly difficult period for Chandana. Trains were not running. So, she could not earn by begging. And Monosha Pala performances were also suspended during that time. Her brothers refused to extend support during this time. One brother told her that he didn't care whether she lives or dies, and that he would not help her. At that time Chandana got support from various NGOs and activists, collected ration, and survived.

Chandana has also faced various mental and physical assaults. Once some drunk boys demanded money from Chandana when she was returning home at night. When Chandana refused to pay, the drunk men beat her up. They hit her head with a brick. Chandana fainted on the road. Thankfully, there were some trans women passing by, who rescued Chandana and brought her to a hospital. Later Chandana got transferred to another hospital for treatment.

Chandana lodged an FIR against these men, but police told her that the men who attacked her could not be found anywhere. The police directed Chandana to withdraw the case. Chandana did not know about legalities back then. So, she withdrew the case.

Chandana noted that when she used to beg in trains, police would regularly file cases against her and other transgender women. She had to pay the police five hundred rupees for each case against her. She does not know what the cases are about. It did not matter how much she earned, she had to pay the police anyway. This further eats into her earnings and makes it challenging for her to meet her household expenses.

Chandana's neighbours harass Chandana a lot. They don't want Chandana to live in the same neighbourhood. They say that the neighbourhood environment is polluted if Hijra people like her live there. Chandana complained to the police first, but police told her that they can't come to her neighbourhood repeatedly to solve the issue. The police even advised Chandana to sell the house and move elsewhere. Chandana's Guru along with a few others went and talked to the people to solve the issue. After that, the neighbours were silent for some time, but they have started harassing Chandana again.

Chandana has a lot of loans. Her brothers have told her that they will not take care of her. So Chandana has decided that she wants to sell the house and leave, but her brothers also have shares in the house. So, Chandana is unsure about whether the sale will actually go through. Chandana wants to live with dignity in a newer environment. Her main goal right now is to live for herself and do a different job. She wants to leave the begging profession. She wants to set up a small shop or business. She feels very unsure how she will be able to do this.

Every part of Chandana's story is about her trying to stay alive healthily and with dignity. Chandana wants that whatever occupation she ends up working in, she can do it with respect. Nobody should be able to point fingers at her. She also wants to live in an environment that is supportive of her.

Light Under The Lamp

Bikash lives in a village named Baluchor in Malda district of West Bengal. She is a trans woman from a very poor family. Bikash is twenty-six years old and from a forward caste background.

Bikash always considered herself a woman from her childhood. Initially, she had to face a lot of harassment at home. So, she tried to adjust. She didn't wear traditional feminine attire, and even went to school dressed as a boy. Yet she faced a lot of harassment in school. In class five she had to quit going to the school due to excessive bullying.

Bikash's father used to work as a day labourer. Bikash's father came down with tonsillitis once. After that, he kept falling ill again and again. He was unable to do regular work. Bikash's mother worked as a domestic worker. Their family was struggling. So, at around fifteen years of age, Bikash started working at a hotel as a cleaning staff. At first, she used to get paid one hundred rupees per day. After voicing her discontent and through a bit of resistance, she was able to get her salary raised to two hundred and fifty rupees per day. This job requires a lot of hard work. Bikash works about seventeen hours a day. But she has accepted this lifestyle with a smile.

Bikash also performs in theatre and Jatra performances. During the rainy season, she performs in Ramleela and Monosa Pala. She gets paid more from the raamleela work. She used to collect donations at the local theatre and Jatra before. Once a lead actor was absent and Bikash was asked to fill in for that role. She played the role well, which led to more opportunities. Eventually, Bikash got deeply entrenched in this work. Various troupe leaders and organisers like Bikash a lot. So, she gets many shows. She gets paid five hundred to seven hundred rupees daily. But the cost of all the dresses, makeup, and jewellery required for the theatre has to be borne by her.

Bikash maintains a good relationship within the family. She says that the support of her family means a lot to her, though it took her time to get the family to accept her. People in her locality knew about her and her singing and dancing from her childhood. The neighbours do not create issues or harassment for her anymore. She supports her family

financially. She pays for the household expenses from the money earned via domestic work and performances in folk theatre. Bikash has paid for the construction of her family's house as well as the furniture. Bikash also organises a Chhath Puja in her home each year. She spends about fourteen to fifteen thousand rupees for the event. This is the only festival that she follows. Bikash manages her finances expertly. She knows how much money she would need, how much for her own future, and how much to contribute to household expenses. She also maintains some savings for the future.

Bikash now wants to take hormones and laser treatment for herself. She wants to be pretty for herself. Bikash wants to join the Hijra profession in future and specifically do the begging work. She thinks she will earn more there. She feels that she will get a lot more respect and dignity within Hijra gharanas. But she also mentioned that if she gets another job that pays about twenty thousand rupees monthly, she will prefer that to the Hijra profession. She thinks maybe she will not get well paying jobs because she did not complete her education. She thinks she would not be able to work in a pharmacy, a parlour, or a clothing store because of this. She worries she would also be harassed by the men at these jobs. She has said that many customers in the restaurant where she currently works also ask her for sexual favours. She manages them tactfully. She has found an ease of work in her current job.

When we asked her about empowerment, she answered that her learning of power came from seeing other community members. She said that now she can fight for her own dignity after seeing others. If a random person passes any comments on her, she protests instantly. But she also reflected that she will not be able to fight or protest against a group of men alone. Bikash finds support and courage in a local transgender activist. Bikash notes that money is empowering, especially for transgender people. She also said that the reason she contributes to her family is because of her identity as a kothi. The financial contribution ensures her place in her family.

Bikash has been able to build a place of some security and dignity for herself through extreme hard work and discipline. In spite of the

oppression and discrimination that Bikash has faced and is facing, she meets these challenges with a smile and continues to move forward.

How The Flowers With Many Colours Laugh

Sajal lives in Sheoraphuli. Sajal identifies as non-binary gay, is twenty-nine years old, and is from a forward caste background.

Sajal told us a lot of stories from their life. One important thing to note here is that Sajal is financially stable. Their family is quite supportive as well. Sajal has completed their Master's degree in Bharatnatyam from Rabindra Bharati University. Dancing is Sajal's chosen profession. Sajal performs Bharatnatyam. She also performs in Jaagran. Sajal performs as Krishna at some of these events. Sajal has to bear the cost of all the necessary ornaments, jewellery, makeup, and dresses themself.

The folk theatre performances are seasonal. Except for two months, the shows happen throughout the year. During these two months, Sajal works as a make-up artist. Sajal earns about thirty thousand rupees monthly through performances, and about five thousand rupees by doing the make-up work.

Sajal's father has bought some land, and Sajal wants to open a dance school on this land in future. They also want to start a dance troupe. Sajal has some savings. They don't have to contribute to the household expenses. Sajal spends about six thousand to seven thousand rupees per month on themself.

Sajal loves their work. But they have had to struggle to secure their dignity in this work. There used to be many dance troupes that hired performers to perform in Jaagran. After the COVID-19 lockdowns, the leaders of these troupes stopped paying the performers properly. They started deducting payments and would not pay the proper rates. When asked, the leaders blamed the lockdown, but the performers found out from the organisers that the lockdown was not an issue. The organisers had been paying the market rate but troupe leaders were keeping a bigger commission for themselves.

About ten lead performers who played Krishna met at an event in Diamond Harbour. There, they started discussing how their working conditions were exploitative and offensive to them as artists. They wanted the respect due to an artist. They wanted better travel and

lodging arrangements. These were linked to their dignity. And they wanted higher fees for their performance, since they were providing a very high quality of service. They formed a Whatsapp group to continue the conversation.

When we asked why they formed this sort of union of performers, Sajal retorted, *"If in the same show an item dancer can get paid forty thousand rupees per hour, and an anchor earns twenty-five rupees per day, then why can't Krishna be paid as much? Krishna is one of the central characters in the show. Why would the performers of that character travel with hardship? Or get paid less?"*

They formed a group to collectively organise to secure more dignified terms of contract with the organisers. They were able to increase their performance fees, and get an agreement that they would have individual accommodation during the event, travel preferably via Two Tier AC class on trains or at minimum via Three Tier AC class on train, and be provided with a taxi for local transportation.

Sajal mentioned that increasing rates is a complicated process. If they want to increase the rate by a thousand rupees, they need to think about how they need to maintain their character, how to do their grooming, what dresses to wear, what make-up and jewellery to wear, etc. Sajal stressed that this is related to job satisfaction. This union was formed via networking between themselves, and it was a huge success. This is what Sajal sees as their empowerment. They have fought to be recognised as artists, to get the respect and dignity of an artist, a fair pay model for their labour, and to empower themselves in the workplace.

This is movement building at the grassroots.

Love Wins!

Pratik is thirty-five years old. Pratik identifies as transman and is from forward caste. Pratik has finished Madhyamik (Class X). Then, under pressure from family, he left school and started earning.

Pratik's home is in Kasba area of Kolkata. His mother, father, and sister live there. His mother is in ill health. Pratik lives with his wife separately. Pratik finds a lot of support in his wife. His wife's family has accepted him as their son-in-law. Pratik's family also likes his wife, but have not accepted her as their daughter-in-law. They consider her a close friend. Pratik's sister still calls him "*sister*," misgendering him, which he does not like at all. Pratik's sister wants him to give away his share of the inheritance to her daughter.

Pratik has done various jobs. When he started working, he used to work as a salesperson. Then he joined IDEA and later Vodafone as a data entry person. After that, he started working as a security guard. In those days, Pratik used to think of himself as a tomboy, different from other girls. Later he understood himself as transman. He had to face a lot of discrimination at that time. He was given more work. He was made to work until late at night. There was a lot of work pressure. But Pratik took all this as a challenge.

Pratik also had to face discrimination when looking for work. Pratik's aadhaar card still records his name and gender as that assigned at birth, has not been changed. He used to get calls for the interview, but after seeing him face to face, people used to refuse to interview him or give him the job.

When COVID-19 lockdowns started, with a friend's help, Pratik got a housekeeping job at the Chittaranjan National Cancer Institute in New Town, Kolkata. This was contractual work. Pratik worked there for one and a half years. He had to leave the job when his mother fell sick and needed care. He used up all his savings to pay for the hospital and medicine bills for his mother.

Now, Pratik works as a bike-taxi driver. Through this work, he earns about ten thousand to fifteen thousand rupees monthly. But his whole

income is spent on taking care of his aging parents. For Pratik's own expenses, his wife supports him. Pratik's wife bought him a scooty which enabled him to work as a bike-taxi driver. In spite of all this, Pratik's family is unable to accept him or his wife. Pratik says, *"If I stop the financial support to my birth family, from the next day they will distance themselves from him. Only because I am providing for the family, they are accepting me. How much money I have determines what power I have."*

Pratik has to face various forms of discrimination when driving the bike. At various moments his identity is threatened or erased. Passengers can address him as female when they notice his name. He also faces difficulty using the public toilets. He only goes to the few public toilets where the attendants know him. At other places, Pratik has had to proclaim that he is also female, in order to use the toilet safely. At night, he does not accept bike-taxi requests for far off places, since he feels unsafe. He stays quiet and does not talk to the customers at night. We asked whether the bike-taxi company provides support in the case of an emergency at night. Pratik noted that they don't pick up the call or take a long time to respond to emergencies.

Thinking about the future, Pratik said, *"I am an ordinary person. I don't have power. Someday, if I have money, I will start gender affirming hormone therapy. I will continue my studies and continue learning computers. I want to get a good office job."*

Crossing Barriers

Samrat is a twenty-nine year old transman. Samrat lives with his family in Haltu, in a joint family set up. His father and grandmother live with him in the same house. Samrat has studied till Madhyamik (Class X).

Samrat identified as a boy from childhood. He used to dress as a boy any chance he got. Once, Samrat's mother forced him to wear a saree during Durga Puja. However, the saree fell down while Samrat was walking. His mother scolded him badly when they came back home. When Samrat was sixteen or seventeen, his mother left them. Samrat was the oldest child in the family. He was not earning. His father used to taunt him a lot in those days. His family forcibly arranged for Samrat to be married, against his wishes. Samrat lived with his in-laws for one and a half years. He used to feel like a man even then. His husband had a sexual-health problem. His father-in-law wanted to take the place of his husband. Samrat returned back to his birth family. His in-laws did come to take him back, but he refused. Then he took a divorce.

After divorce, Samrat started working as a domestic worker in two places. During that time, he got addicted to drugs under the influence of some friends. He had about ten thousand rupees in his bank account. All of that was spent on drugs. His aunt counselled him and took responsibility for him. Samrat distanced himself from drugs, and started working in six to seven houses as a domestic worker. Today, Samrat earns six to seven thousand rupees per month. He works from 5:30 am to 8 pm. He has to do a lot of time management routinely to accommodate the schedules of his different employers. Samrat says he feels free to wear shorts to work. He does not face any problems at work due to his gender identity. His employers have accepted him.

Samrat keeps a part of his monthly income for his expenses and hands over the rest to his aunt. Samrat does not have any loans. But he has bought an air conditioner for his father and grandmother, for which he pays a monthly payment. Samrat also maintains two LIC policies in his name and one that is in the name of his father.

Samrat loves to play the tabla and drums. When he was in school, he used to drum on the tables and chairs in free time. His science teacher noticed

him playing and started encouraging him. He gifted Samrat a tabla at his retirement. Samrat started learning to play the tabla by himself. He did not have a music teacher at that time.

Samrat received support from the family for whom he works in the early morning. They are very passionate about music and poetry. When they learned about Samrat's interest in learning the tabla, they provided him a lot of support. They arranged for a teacher for Samrat, who teaches him without charging tuition fees. Samrat wants to learn the tabla diligently. He is a fast learner too. But after finishing all his work, he is often unable to go to the tabla classes. His teacher suggested that he can come for classes in the afternoon, during lunch hours. His tabla teacher supports him a lot and encourages him to learn so he can reach a place of respect. Samrat recounts proudly how he once performed at a Saraswati puja program at his teacher's house. His employers also ask him to attend the classes. But Samrat noted that what they actually mean is, *"First, finish our work, then you should go attend the class."* Everyone encourages him to learn, but no one releases his time for that.

When we asked what empowerment means, Samrat said, *"money is power."* He elaborated that, *"If someone requested fifty rupees from me, I can afford to give that. But if he asks for two thousand rupees, I do not have the power to give that."* Samrat added that time is also power, noting, *"If I want to go on a vacation with my friends, I can request leave from my employers for one day. But no one will give me leave for two continuous days. I don't even have the power to take leave from my job for two days."*

Samrat wants to be able to learn to play the tabla really well. He wants to reach a respectable place from where he would not need to look back. If possible, he would like to set up a small shop as a business. And he wants to transform fully into a man. Samrat is proud that he is a tabla player, that he can make people smile, and that he can give time to his family even after all his work.

Samrat noted that, *"We need to change society so that we can survive with our heads held high, no one can raise a finger on us or tell us that*

we are girl or woman. So that we can freely walk in public wearing a sando ganji." Samrat ends with a slogan, "*We will do!! We will fight!! We will win!! I am proud I am Bengali, I am proud I am trans!*"

In Conclusion

In this concluding chapter we present some of the summary findings from analysing across the case studies. For this purpose we looked across the case studies to see how the participants made sense of empowerment, where or in whom they found support in their empowerment, and what gender affirmation means to them. We analysed how COVID-19 lockdowns impacted our participants. We also tried to understand how the difference case study participants imagined for their future. And we tried to articulate policy positions or emphases that emerged in our discussions with the participants.

We are showing our analyses in the form of various charts. The various points in these charts are mentioned by various people, not a single individual and they are not direct quotations.

In the first two charts, in the following pages, we are presenting in chart 1, what empowerment means to our case study participants, and in chart 2, where or in whom do case study participants find support for their empowerment.

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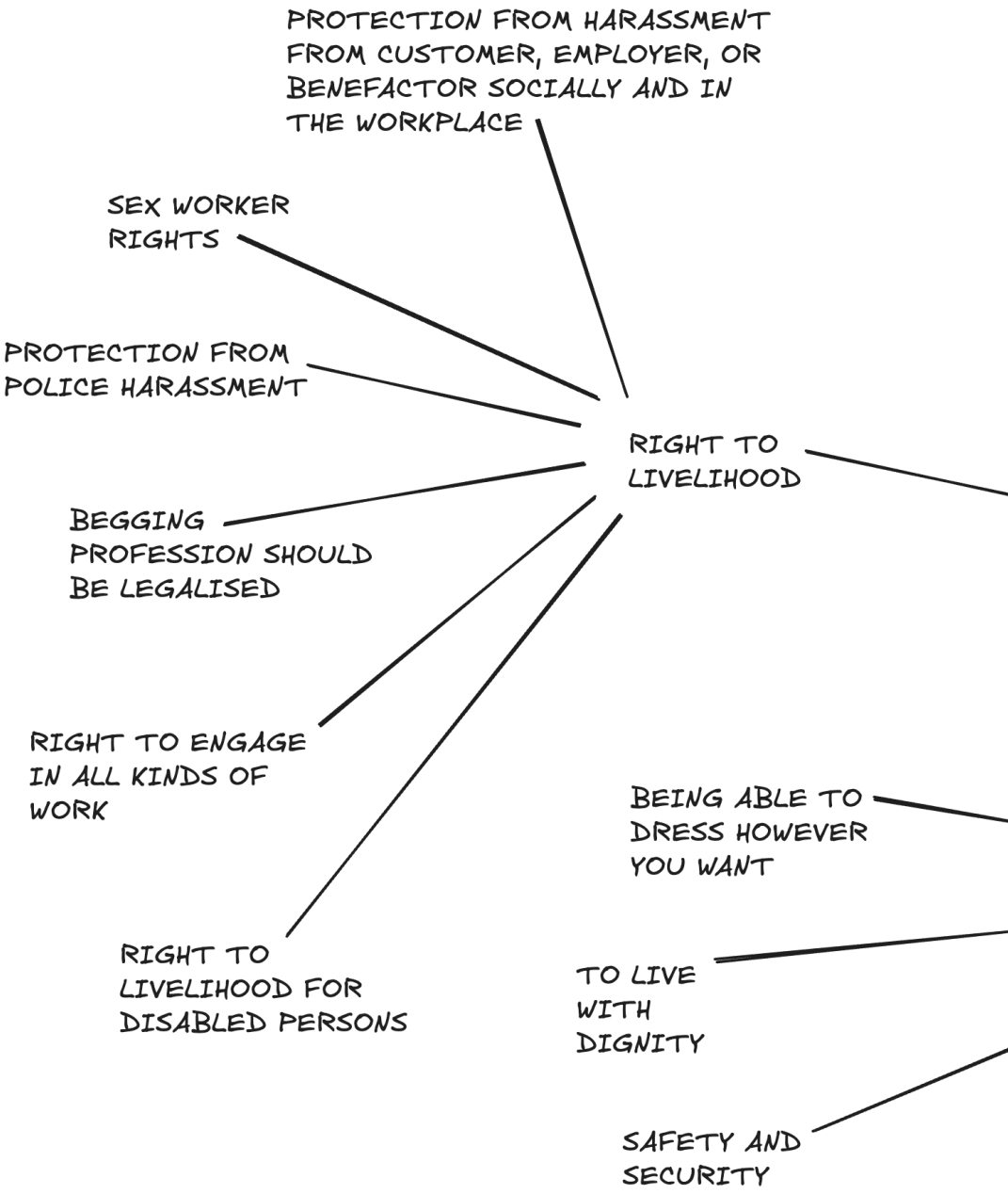
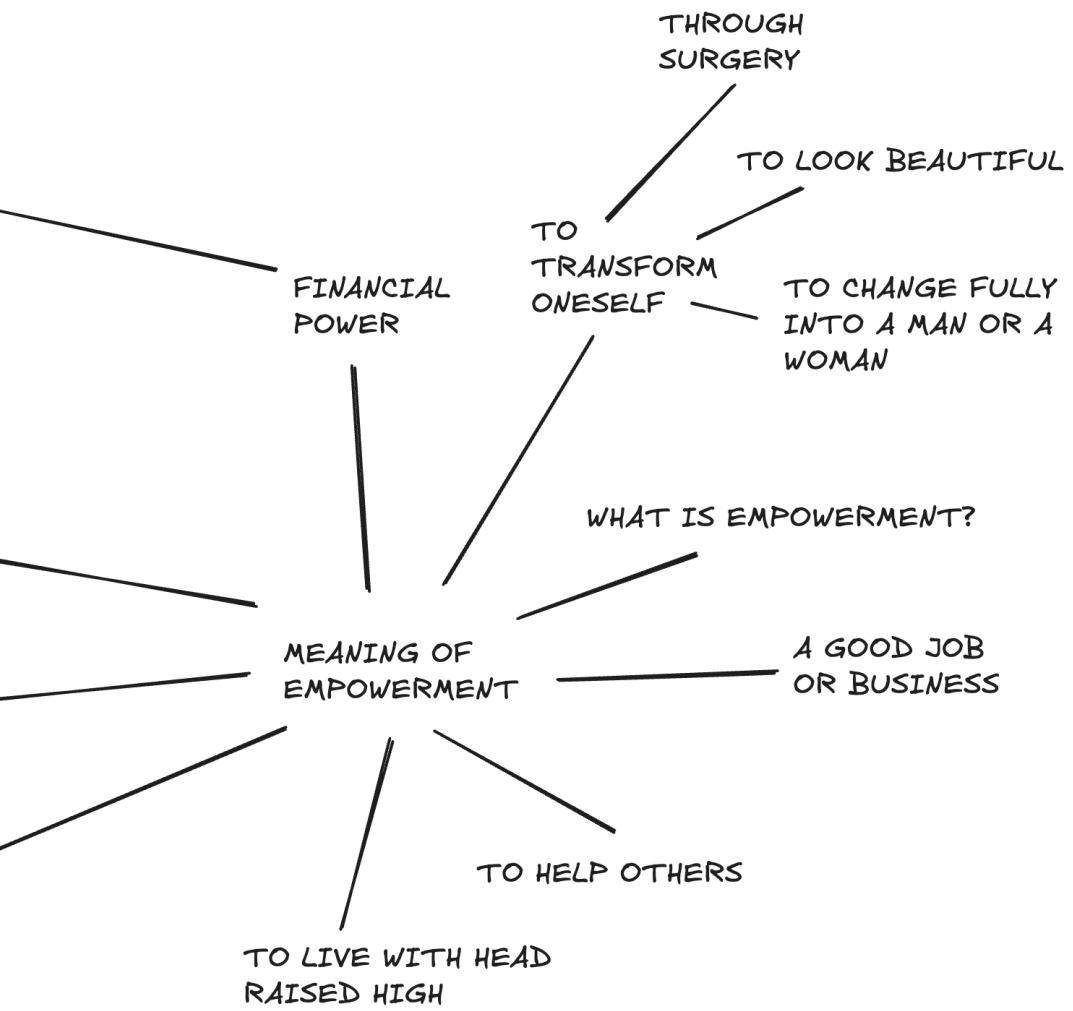

PROTECTION FROM HARASSMENT FROM CUSTOMER, EMPLOYER, OR BENEFACTOR SOCIALLY AND IN THE WORKPLACE
SEX WORKER RIGHTS
PROTECTION FROM POLICE HARASSMENT
RIGHT TO LIVELIHOOD
BEGGING PROFESSION SHOULD BE LEGALISED
RIGHT TO ENGAGE IN ALL KINDS OF WORK
BEING ABLE TO DRESS HOWEVER YOU WANT
RIGHT TO LIVELIHOOD FOR DISABLED PERSONS
TO LIVE WITH DIGNITY
SAFETY AND SECURITY

CHART 1 - WHAT DID EMPOWERMENT MEAN TO OUR CASE STUDY PARTICIPANTS


THROUGH SURGERY
TO LOOK BEAUTIFUL
TO TRANSFORM ONESELF
TO CHANGE FULLY INTO A MAN OR A WOMAN
FINANCIAL POWER
WHAT IS EMPOWERMENT?
MEANING OF EMPOWERMENT
A GOOD JOB OR BUSINESS
TO HELP OTHERS
TO LIVE WITH HEAD RAISED HIGH

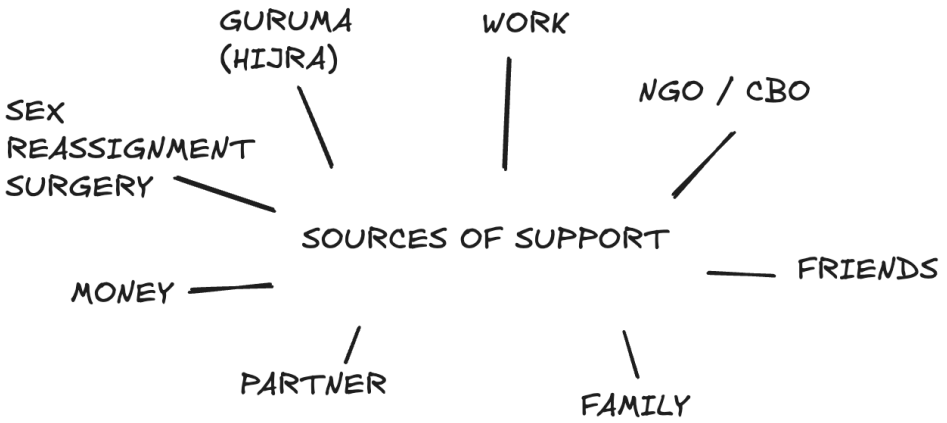


CHART 2 - WHERE OR IN WHOM DO CASE STUDY PARTICIPANTS REPORT FINDING SUPPORT FOR THEIR EMPOWERMENT

Here we want to elaborate more on the roles of family, friends, livelihood, and making gender-affirming changes.

Our case study participants had varied relations with their birth family. Some participants reported finding acceptance and support within the family or from specific family members such as mother, grandmother, sister or nephew. But a majority of participants also reported torture and physical and mental abuse within the family, especially in their childhood and adolescence. We have reported earlier that across all the participants in our study, about seventy-four percent reported staying with their birth family. In these case studies, we also notice that, most of the case study participants also support their families financially. While some case study participants reported doing this out of a feeling of responsibility, duty, or care, others also report feeling that their acceptance at home is contingent on continuing the financial support.

For some case study participants, friends have been a source of empowerment. Sajal told us how they co-organised with other Krishna performers to negotiate more dignified working conditions and higher performance charges with their clients. Punita and Mukul, Rachana and Madhu, they are fighting together to secure workplace safety and dignity

for sex workers and are supporting each other in their work and lives. Raj told us how she finds hope in her friend, and she hopes to go to Mumbai and work as a bar dancer with her friend. Some participants note how other transgender friends or mentors helped them find dignity in their gender expression or when navigating stigmatised professions such as sex work or begging.

The workplace was a place for empowerment as well as abuse. Many case study participants noted discrimination, low wages, and physical and sexual abuse at their workplace. They report being unable to sustain in many workplaces. But some participants report finding their joy or voice or dignity or social standing or economic stability through their work, be it begging, sex work, cooking, performances in folk theatre such as Manosha Pala, Jatra, and Jagran, or selling garments.

Our research participants also had varied views about making gender-affirming changes, including on its connection with their empowerment. In Chart 3, we present how the case study participants view gender-affirming changes.

CHART 3 - THIS CHART DEPICTS WHAT MAKING GENDER-AFFIRMING CHANGE MEANS TO OUR CASE STUDY PARTICIPANTS. GENDER-AFFIRMING CHANGE HERE REFERS TO ANY FORM OF PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL TRANSITIONING THAT THE CASE STUDY PARTICIPANTS REFERRED TO.

Different case study participants had different views and emotions toward making gender-affirming changes. Many participants expressed the desire to transition, linking that to their fundamental right to wear clothes of their choice. Many participants regarded physical transitioning through hormone therapy, breast surgery, or genital surgery as something they wanted to do or had already undergone that. Some are unable to start physical transitioning due to lack of money. Some participants, however, express the desire to socially transition but without undergoing surgery. That too they regard as their empowerment.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN:

The COVID-19 lockdowns had a deep negative impact on most of our case study participants. A lot of them reported losing their job. Those in the begging profession were unable to earn because the trains were shut down. Some participants started doing sex work. Many participants reported surviving on rations from NGOs, CBOs, or other social workers. But, given the lack of income, they struggled to pay their rent, electricity, and medical bills. Some participants even struggled to put food on the table.

After the lockdown ended, many did not get back their jobs, or lost the jobs they had during the lockdown. They had to look for other jobs. Some participants had to join the begging profession or sex work to make a living. After the lockdowns, sex workers are also seeing fewer customers.

Next, we look at how our case study participants expressed their aspirations for the future, or what they dreamed for in their future. This is presented in Chart 4.

CHART 4 - IN THIS CHART WE PRESENT WHAT THE CASE STUDY PARTICIPANTS ASPIRED FOR IN THEIR FUTURE.

Finally, we bring together the different policy relevant emphases that emerge in our conversation with the case study participants. This is shown in Chart 5 on the next page.

- NEXT PAGE CENTRE SPREAD -

CHART 5 - SOME POLICY ISSUES RELEVANT TO THE EMPOWERMENT OF GRASSROOTS TRANSGENDER FOLKS

BEGGING PROFESSION
SHOULD BE LEGALISED

OPPORTUNITIES TO
PURSUE ANY PROFESSION

ICY

PROTECTION FROM
SEXUAL HARASSMENT

EDUCATIONAL
OPPORTUNITIES

LOANS WITH
REDUCED
INTEREST RATES

RIGHT TO
HOUSING

GOVERNMENT
PROVIDED LAND
OR HOUSE

It is not that there are no policies on paper but it is that often the policies are only on paper. The people are not being benefitted even when the policy exists for their protection or welfare. How does one prove that the discrimination they are facing at their work place is gender-based? How can underprivileged folks be expected to spend time, effort, and money to prove that they are getting discriminated against? Instead, most look for other jobs, try to move on from the trauma of sexual abuse and assault, and so on. We need to broaden our advocacy efforts for policy reforms.

Academicians interested in research on transgender lives should work together with the members of the community. We are not invited to participate in analysis. Often the results of research are also not shared with us. Grassroots folks also have a right to conduct research, with support and dignity. Grassroots transgender folks will also need to come forward for this work. We can also be co-investigators!

Finally, we would like to say that our participants are helping us learn that in various places, grassroots transgender folks are struggling, they are fighting with their circumstances and the society so that they can live with dignity, with heads held high. Through that struggle, they are transforming the social space around them, in different ways. This too is the gender justice movement. The participants are all waging their own protests, to survive and to bring social change. They too are our movement leaders.

We hope this movement of grassroots transgender folks continues. We hope that the struggle to unite continues.

In Gratitude

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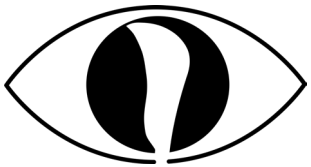
We note that the responsibility for the report and its findings lies with the authors only.



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This book is an exploration into what empowerment looks like to grassroots transgender communities in West Bengal, India. What is the economic situation of our community? After the COVID-19 lockdowns, many of our community members had to change professions, many went into debt, many haven't found stable jobs. What challenges did they face? How many people are still struggling? What does research at the grassroots look like? The writers try to investigate these questions through lifestories of grassroots trans people.

Sintu is a grassroots activist, independant researcher, and primary author of this book. Sintu is a child of sex worker. Sintu has two dogs, Dustu and Chini. Sintu loves to spend time in nature. Sintu tells amazing stories. Sintu loves when her friends ask her to cook for them. Sintu prefers seventies' sad hindi songs. Sintu loves watching cartoons. Sintu doesn't like to eat pumpkin.

Ayesha is an education researcher who teaches at Homi Bhaba Centre for Science Education, Mumbai, India. Ayesha is a homebody. Ayesha doesn't like author bios. Ayesha is the co-author of this book.

Wree is an independant anti-disciplinary artist, editor, and publisher of this book. Wree has an opinion on everything. Wree is known to know things. Friends often reach out to Wree for information and advice. Wree enjoys a good pasta salad. Wree likes her greens. Wree is always making lists. Wree can nap anywhere.

DAXAYONI PROKASHONI
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